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AUTHOR	McCarthy, J. Christopher
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ABSTRACT

The Project for Adult College Education (PACE) is a general education core curriculum designed for working adults. PACE students receive approximately half the classroom hours in each subject area that they would in a traditional classroom. The balance of time is devoted to viewing course-related instructional television and participating in weekend conference lectures or activities. The program was developed in the mid-1970's and was designed to take into account the barriers to higher education facing working adults. While some faculty view PACE as an easy way to earn a degree, supporters point to PACE's positive elements, such as writing-across-the-curriculum and the conferences which provide valuable learning experiences outside of the traditional lecture. Concerns about the viability of the PACE curriculum led to a spring 1993 survey of 291 PACE students at Los Angeles, California's Harbor College. Survey results indicated the following: (1) the PACE program had an older student body than traditional programs; (2) 94% of respondents intended to transfer, and over half had left college earlier but returned through PACE; (3) over 99% gave the program and quality of instruction passing grades, and 93% felt that the classroom time was adequate; (4) the highest rated aspects of the program included the condensed curriculum, evening and Saturday schedule, quality of instruction, faculty involvement, students' sense of belonging, and coursework focused on important issues; and (5) the element most often criticized was the currency of television programming. (KP)

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J. Christopher McCarthy
ERIC Clearinghouse for Community Colleges

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University of California at Los Angeles
3051 Moore Hall
405 Hilgard Avenue
Los Angeles, CA 90095-1521
(310) 825-3931

Digest

June 1995

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The Project for Adult College Education (PACE): Student Characteristics, Perceptions, and Writing Development

by J. Christopher McCarthy

The Project for Adult College Education (PACE) is a general education core curriculum designed for working adults. In PACE, students receive approximately half the classroom hours in each subject area that they would in a traditional class. The balance of time is devoted to viewing instructional television (which is directly related to individual course-work) and to participating in weekend conference lectures or activities. Concerns about the viability of the PACE curriculum led to the research at Los Angeles Harbor College presented in this digest. The digest takes a brief look at the history of PACE, analyzes PACE students' characteristics, examines student perceptions of the program, and compares the writing development of PACE students with the writing development of students in the traditional curriculum.

History

The principal architect of the PACE model, Wayne State University researcher, Otto Feinstein, targeted working adults as a population largely neglected by higher education. His Weekend College was designed to allow working adults greater access to college study. In the mid-1970s, the American Federation of Teachers coined the name Project for Adult College Education (PACE) and, with Ford Foundation support, sponsored the implementation of PACE programs throughout the country, with individual colleges adapting the Wayne State model to suit their needs. The first project west of the Mississippi was initiated by the Los Angeles Community College District (LACCD) in 1981.

The LACCD offered PACE as a complete core curriculum leading to the Associate in Arts (AA) degree in five semesters. The goals of the PACE project as stated by the original advisory committee included:

- Providing a quality, liberal arts-based education to full-time working adults through interdisciplinary and team-taught classes, a curriculum based upon themes oriented to working adults, and a delivery system consisting of television, weekend conferences, and class lectures.
- Making full-time education available to students in a condensed time frame.
- Offering a fully transferable curriculum.
- Qualifying students for the AA degree and transfer.
- Developing students' reading, writing and critical thinking skills.

The Current PACE Program

PACE's current structure is built around a five-semester, humanities-based transfer curriculum, with students enrolled in a block of four courses per semester. Each semester is broken into two nine-week terms, during which students enroll in two paired courses, which are team-taught whenever possible. Students attend classes one evening per week, and watch two hours per week of instructional television at home. In past years, instructional materials were broadcast via cable channels; PACE, which has rights to Annenberg materials, now provides videotapes for student viewing at home. Students attend six Saturday conferences over the semester, each generally lasting from 8:00 a.m. until 6:00 p.m. Two additional half-day Saturday conferences are scheduled for exams. Saturday conferences address course-oriented material and try to create a liberal arts college environment with guest speakers, films, experiential activities, and concerts.

Need for the Program

Recent research has underscored the need for programs that take into account the barriers to higher education facing adult students. Traditional-age students (between 18 and 22) are no longer the norm on college campuses. Data from the National Center for Education Statistics (1994) indicate that 38.4% of all college students in 1991 were 25 years of age or older. At two-year institutions, 31% of fall 1991 enrollments were made up of students who reported their age as 30 or older (Phillippe, 1995). Because of work and family commitments, 70% of adult students attend college part-time (Aslanian, 1993). Consequently, colleges have had to examine whether the curriculum, and the manner in which it is offered, is accessible to adults, many of whom work full-time. The PACE program is a model that responds to adult students.

Need for Research

Some faculty view PACE as an easy way to earn a degree. The time devoted exclusively to a particular subject may be between 18 and 30 hours in comparison to 54 to 60 hours in the traditional curriculum. Critics regard the classroom instructional time as insufficient, especially in English, the sciences, and math. They question whether students are being misled into believing they are ready for transfer after a less-than-adequate foundation of lower division coursework.

PACE advocates point to the benefits of a structured course of study in which:

- Writing Across the Curriculum is implemented;
- students work together over five semesters;
- instructors dovetail courses into a cohesive whole; and
- Saturday conferences allow a range of valuable learning activities that are outside the scope of traditional lecture-oriented classes.

The PACE controversy is taking place at a time when all educational programs, but especially nontraditional programs, are being examined in light of shrinking funding. As

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colleges make choices concerning which programs are central to their mission and futures, efforts made for special populations. such as working adults, are often seen as expendable. Justifying a program such as PACE requires solid evidence of its value and effectiveness.

The Current Study

In spring 1993, a survey was administered to the 291 PACE students at Harbor College. Included were questions about students' characteristics, perceptions of the program, and time spent on study. To measure PACE's effectiveness in teaching writing skills, PACE and traditional students who were enrolled in English 101 during the spring semester were asked to write essays comparable to those they had completed during college orientation.

Study Findings

The results paint a clear picture of the PACE student population. PACE has an older student body than does the traditional program: 81% of PACE students are over 24 years of age, compared with 53% of the regular college population. The PACE program has twice the percentage of African-American students than the regular program, and a much higher percentage of women.

The fact that 94% of PACE students plan to transfer is not surprising, as PACE is designed as a transfer curriculum; more interesting is the finding that 46% of PACE students identify themselves as being unable to attend college outside of the PACE format. Over half (63%) of the students indicated that they had left college at an earlier time and returned through PACE. The fact that 94% of PACE students work more than 30 hours per week indicates that although the program is open to enrollment by any student, it is finding its appeal among those for whom it was primarily designed.

Student Perceptions of PACE

Over 99% of the PACE students gave both the program and quality of instruction passing grades, and 93% felt that classroom time was adequate. The results on out-of-class study time revealed that 61% of students spent less than seven hours per week studying or working on assignments. Only 12.5% of the students studied more than 10 hours per week.

PACE students were also asked to identify the best aspect of PACE and the aspect they would like most to see changed. The following were frequently cited as the best aspects of PACE:

- program design, which provides a condensed curriculum and evening and Saturday schedule, allowing working people to enroll full-time and progress in a timely manner;
- quality of instruction, and greater involvement of faculty;
- students' feeling of identification with the program and sense of shared "belongingness." Many noted that their study groups were particularly beneficial;
- the nature of the interdisciplinary instruction; and
- coursework centered on what the students regarded as "important issues."

When asked about program elements that needed changing, the most common responses concerned the television component. Many students felt the television programs had little to do with the subjects being studied, and criticized the lack of currency and the style of presentation of some programs. This problem is being addressed by providing course-related videotapes from the Annenberg collection for student home use. Other criticisms focused on the unavailability of support facilities on Saturday such as the library and bookstore, and the need for a summer component.

Writing Skills

Student responses to questions about writing in PACE revealed that PACE students apparently have greater communication with teachers about written assignments than do regular community college students. This may be due to the nature of the instructional approach or to the age of the students, who might be less intimidated by instructors than younger students. Also, PACE students are more likely to write papers which draw from different sources and which take extended periods of time than do regular community college students.

Entrance and Exit Writing Scores

As evidenced by comparisons of orientation essays and essays written after completing English 101, PACE students enter and exit with more developed writing skills than traditional students. However, students in regular sections of English 101 show greater writing development while in college.

The argument that PACE students exit with skills that are below the level of traditional English 101 students does not appear to have evidence to support it. Although PACE might not provide the opportunity for writing development that the regular 18 week semester does, the students emerge with at least equal, and apparently slightly better, ability to write college essays. It must be remembered, though, that their entrance skills are also significantly better. PACE may make up for the shortened English 101 course in part by promoting writing across the curriculum.

Conclusions

PACE appears to fulfill its objective of offering an academically viable route to the Associate Degree for working adults. To determine whether PACE students obtain the skills needed for successful transfer to a four-year institution, however, continued study will be necessary. This research can move forward, though, with the confidence that the PACE program, while in need of continued critical self-examination, is a program which is valued by those who participate in it and is often viewed as a "last chance" for adults who have returned to college to reshape their lives. The PACE program appears to be a model that other institutions can use to serve working adults.

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